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Responses

Universal Basic Income

UBI as a Tool for Solidarity: A Response to Richard Todd Stafford

Caroline West

ABSTRACT I am examining UBI in order to imagine a more egalitarian democracy under capitalism through the redistribution of national wealth that all labor, paid and unpaid, create. I maintain that the redistribution of capital through a UBI cannot be completely dismissed; however, the key would be to remain dedicated to emboldening individual economic agency through bottom-up initiatives while battling for infrastructural changes in a governmental, top-down fashion.

In a thoughtfully developed response, Richard Todd Stafford offers a critique of my examination of the potential effects of an implementation of a universal basic income to combat the economic struggles of the population living in Central Appalachia.¹ Stafford focuses his analysis on the necessity of "solidarity" for any potential implementation of a national UBI. Solidarity takes both a macro, national form and a micro, regional form, which in my case study was centered on Central Appalachia. Stafford questions whether my formulation of a UBI was a "speculative narrative," where the aspirational effects could be grounded in other political projects, or if it is "a practical political project" in and of itself.

As a practical political project, Stafford highlights Matt Bruenig's American Solidarity Fund, a national social wealth fund modeled on the Alaska Permanent Fund, which Bruenig proposes would eliminate wealth inequality.² Stafford compellingly argues that through this type of redistribution, class struggles would dramatically shift focus from the private sector to the state. Therefore, such a fundamental shift in economic relations under a UBI "would entail a radical political mobilization and/or presuppose a significant social transformation has already occurred."³ I realize that a political revolution necessary to implement a UBI would be profound not only in economic but also ideological terms. Stafford justly treats my analysis as a speculative narrative and, in doing so, elicits a legitimate question: if there were a political will to create a UBI, should that power be harnessed to achieve this goal, or would it temper any revolutionary potential to fundamentally upend structural social and economic inequalities?

I do concur that if a UBI began disbursement tomorrow, it would not elicit a profound social transformation because existing structural deficiencies would still be in place. This assertion in no way implies that a UBI would not be individually impactful. Current Democratic Presidential candidate Andrew Yang's primary campaign platform is the Freedom Dividend, a \$1,000 per month UBI dispensed to every American citizen over the age of eighteen.⁴ As a Silicon Valley entrepreneur, Yang warns of encroaching automation in a spectrum of employment sectors that threaten to undermine the ability for Americans to find work and earn wages. An additional \$1,000 per month to every individual subsisting on minimum wage employment, unemployment, or

underemployment would absolutely provide some economic relief. A monthly injection of \$1,000 could cover the medical insurance deductible for two people or rent for a studio apartment in a small- to mid-sized city. This monthly infusion of cash would alleviate real economic hardships for paying the costs of some essential needs. However, in this scenario, a UBI would simply help individuals maintain survival within the economic status quo and would do little to challenge the exorbitant costs of health care, housing, childcare, and the like. Therefore, in the immediate-term and in isolation, a UBI would only make the unaffordability of these basic rights slightly more accessible. That is, until inflation and the rising costs of living expenses erode and diminish any benefits of a stand-alone UBI initiative.

Rather than a mechanism to undermine the capitalist mode of production, Yang posits that a UBI is essential for the continuation of a functioning economic system, which he argues would be actualized as “human-centered capitalism.”⁵ Essentially, Yang hopes to “save” capitalism from itself through a UBI. This narrative on the potential effects of a UBI is firmly entrenched in what Stafford rightly warns could lead to an increase in the tight tethering of commodity and monetary exchange with “what it means to be a social subject.”⁶ The skepticism Stafford expresses on over-romanticizing this kind of soft capitalism and a “small-is-beautiful localism” of the market is well-placed since we know that small businesses do not compete with, much less disrupt, the destructive effects of massive resource extractions by multinational corporations.⁷ However, I maintain that the redistribution of capital through a UBI cannot be completely dismissed. The key would be to remain dedicated to emboldening individual economic agency through bottom-up initiatives while battling for infrastructural changes in a governmental, top-down fashion.

The Green New Deal policy resolution introduced in Congress by Senator Ed Markey and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez provides a blueprint for restructuring government’s role and responsibilities to its population. It not only imagines policy that puts renewal energy expansion and environmental protections for air, water, and land at the forefront, but it also tackles labor and wage exploitation in its calls for raising the federal minimum wage and protecting the collective right of workers to form unions and organize.⁸ The resolution includes a provision for ensuring access to health care to all citizens, which could be achievable with a single-payer system alongside programs to bring that care to non-urban areas. The resolution articulates a bottom-up commitment by way of “transparent and inclusive consultation, collaboration, and partnership with frontline and vulnerable communities, labor unions, worker cooperatives, civil society groups, academia, and businesses.”⁹ By highlighting worker cooperatives, perhaps the policy marks a commitment to develop and support these types of the socialized businesses that are not solely grounded in market relations.

Stafford acutely brings forth the argument that continuing to treat Appalachia as distinct and unique “could under some conditions also encourage reactionary cultural insularity or even foster social exclusion.”¹⁰ I agree and I have addressed the problematic positioning of Appalachians as an anomaly of American poverty in my dissertation work, specifically in its photographic representation.¹¹ My critique of the work of photographer Shelby Lee Adams of Appalachians in Eastern Kentucky feels relevant in this context. Adams has dedicated forty-plus years to photographing families who mainly reside in the remote mountain hollers in Eastern Kentucky.¹² He believes he is trying to right the visual and rhetorical wrongs made by the government and media who historically have not portrayed Appalachians “honestly.”¹³ In his work, Adams comments on the ways that Appalachia has been transformed in the past few decades:

My work has strictly followed word of mouth and personal introductions for all these years. However, it is becoming more difficult to find the authentic salt-of-the-earth people, who are now being overrun by a more sugar-coated society. The families who occupied this land for more than a couple hundred years are now interspersed with a new breed of Appalachian and land developers driving Hummers and Escalades, owning oddly shaped swimming pools and mansions built into the mountaintops after the coal is removed and the mountains reclaimed . . . It is a more varied and diluted world now. Salt preserves wholesomeness and prevents decay, but the people from the earlier, harder-formed age who bear that special look are now in decline.¹⁴

The dichotomy Adams presents between the “salt-of-the-earth people” of yesteryear as wholesome and simple and the newly arrived “sugar-coated society” that live in large houses and drive expensive cars implies that the authenticity of Appalachians is defined through their hardship and poverty. Adams is not naming gentrifying forces and its negative effects on land and wealth distribution; instead, he is dismayed that those with wealth are moving to the region. Adams wants to strictly control the appropriate idea of what betterment should be in his Appalachian narrative. He universalizes an ahistorical agrarian myth by conveniently leaving out the very specific history of the conditions of land and labor in the mineral rich mountains of Appalachia that he took as his subject. In Adams visual narrative, he argues for the maintenance of the status quo that not only separates Appalachian poverty from the rest of the country but also preserves existing conditions of structural inequalities.

Despite the counterrevolutionary narrative that Adams espouses, the pride that Appalachians feel for their culture and geography is not atypical from that of other regions in the United States. What often grounds these sources of pride can be framed through the specific histories of working-class labor practices across the country. This is seen in the pride of mining, farming, and steel manufacturing inside and outside Appalachia, manufacturing labor throughout the Midwest, and agricultural labor in the Great Plains and California’s Central Valley. Further, I would argue that the urban and suburban white-collar labor practices could align in this larger narrative on culture of work and space. I believe there can be solidarity between the specific history of land and labor in Appalachia alongside that of other geographic and political economic regions in the United States. It is possible that a UBI could provide one thread to link rather than divide people across the different political economic perspectives. I appreciate Stafford’s generous analysis and critique of the tensions between social life and market forces inherent in any UBI initiative strapped to the capitalist mode of production. I hope there continues to be robust debate on both the theoretical underpinnings of a UBI and its potential as an actualized political project.

Notes

1. Richard Todd Stafford, “Response to Caroline West’s ‘From Company Town to Post-Industrial: Inquiry on the Redistribution of Space and Capital with a Universal Basic Income,’” *Lateral* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2019), <https://doi.org/10.25158/L8.1.11>. ↗
2. Matt Bruenig, “Social Wealth Fund for America,” *People’s Policy Project*, <https://peoplespolicyproject.org/projects/social-wealth-fund>; Stafford, “Response,” paragraph 10. ↗
3. Stafford, “Response,” paragraph 12. ↗
4. Yang2020, “Policy: The Freedom Dividend,” <https://www.yang2020.com/policies/the-freedom-dividend/>. ↗

5. Yang2020, "Policy: Human-Centered Capitalism," <https://www.yang2020.com/policies/human-capitalism/>. 
6. Stafford, "Response," paragraph 19. 
7. Stafford, "Response," footnote 32. 
8. "Recognizing the Duty of the Federal Government to Create a Green New Deal," H.R. 109, 116th Cong. (2019), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-resolution/109/text>. 
9. "Recognizing the Duty of the Federal Government." 
10. Stafford, "Response," paragraph 16. 
11. Caroline West, "Picturing Capital: Mass Media and the Art of Visualizing Poverty" (PhD diss., George Mason University, 2019). 
12. Adams has published five photographic books on his Appalachian subjects. His Appalachian work is included in over sixty permanent collections including such prestigious American art institutions as the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Art Institute of Chicago, Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Museum of Modern Art. He is also represented by numerous art galleries in major US cities including Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. Adams maintains a website that can be found at <https://shelby-lee-adams.blogspot.com>. 
13. *The True Meaning of Pictures: Shelby Lee Adams' Appalachia*, directed by Jennifer Baichwal (New York: Docurama, 2003), DVD. 
14. Shelby Lee Adams, *Salt & Truth* (Richmond, VA: Candela Books, 2011), 25. 

 [Bio](#)

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Caroline finished her PhD in Cultural Studies at George Mason University in 2019. She holds a MA in Arts Administration and Policy from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a BFA in Photography from Arizona State University. Her research is focused on visual culture, political economy, and theories of race and gender. Her dissertation is titled *Picturing Capital: Mass Media and the Art of Visualizing Poverty*.

